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Remember When: Piney Lasky

Piney Lasky first became involved in auto racing fielding a car for driver John Hubbard in the 50's. He and six other businessmen purchased the defunct Jennerstown Speedway in 1967, reopening it one year later. Piney bought out his partners in 1973 becoming the sole owner of Jennerstown Speedway, making the track one of the best dirt facilities around. Lasky ran many divisions including sprints, late models, modifieds, four cylinders, and street stocks. In addition, Lasky promoted the Bedford Speedway for three years in the early 1980's. I was fortunate to be a competitor at the speedway in the cadets, semi-lates and super compacts in the 70' and 80's.

Jennerstown Speedway, one of the oldest short-track facilities in the United States, has undergone a number of transformations leading up to today's state-of-the-art motorsports complex.

Constructed in the late 1920's as a flat half-mile dirt oval, the Jenners Fairgrounds, as the speedway was then known, played host to 'big car' racing during the 1930's. Following World War II a smaller, lighted quarter-mile dirt oval was built inside the larger track in 1953. Laird Brunner became the first weekly promoter to present stock car racing. During this period the original half-mile track was abandoned.

Brunner was followed by the promotional team of Carmen Amica and Dick Basserman, who guided the speedway during the early 1960's. Other promoters during the quarter mile era included Lou Smith and George Kittey. The half-mile oval was rebuilt in the mid-1960's, but was quickly closed again due to poor track conditions.

A major modernization project took place in 1967 when local businessmen John Frambaugh, Sam Turrillo, Bill Philson, John Philson, Doc Whiney, Harry Horne and Piney Lasky purchased the

grounds and completely rebuilt the track into one of the fastest half-mile dirt ovals in the nation. For the next 20-seasons Jennerstown was known for its winged open wheel sprint car and dirt late model action.

Over the course of time Lasky became the sole owner of the facility and in 1987 made the decision to move Jennerstown to the next level by paving the track and bringing asphalt racing back to Western PA for the first time since the famed Heidelberg Raceway was sold for development in 1973.

Lasky also upgraded the grandstand and concession areas, affiliated the track with NASCAR, and brought major sanctioned events to the Somerset County speedplant. Lasky died unexpectedly in 1994, passing the torch to his son, Stanley Jr., who ran the operation for the next five seasons, before selling to former speedway late model champion Steve Peles and Hooters Restaurants founder, Bob Brooks, in 2000.

After three seasons Peles and Brooks sold the track to Dave Wheeler, who initiated an immediate upgrade in operations. Wheeler repaved the oval in 2004 with a \$350,000 polymer-based racing surface. Future plans call for improvements to the infield/pit area, along with new concession buildings and rest rooms on the spectator side.

Jennerstown Speedway celebrated its 75th anniversary as a motorsports facility Saturday May 21st with a Fan Appreciation and Nostalgia Night. The list of activities included a retired driver's reunion and the induction of seven members into the newly established speedway Hall of Fame. The 2005 Hall of Fame class included: the late Piney Lasky, the late Mike (Little) Serokman, Jim Burns, Lou Blaney, Larry Wright, Steve Peles, and Jack Freeman.

"Auto racing has been taking place at Jennerstown since the great depression," said General Manager Larry Mattingly. "Indianapolis 500 qualifiers and current NASCAR Nextel stars have competed here. But, it's the local drivers we really want to honor. The guys who raced weekly in Somerset County throughout the past eight decades are the real heart and soul of Jennerstown."

While attending the RPM Promoters workshops in Florida along with Piney I was amused when other speedway owners and promoters would seek him out to ask for advice. They knew he was the right man to ask and his speedway was in a class of its own.

Lasky was a fair man who treated everyone equally. Piney was an Army veteran who started working at age 14. Piney and Clara were married for 44 years and had five children, Stan, Jr., Andrew, Michael, Kathy, and Jeanne, plus five grandchildren. Many people thought that his name was really "Piney". When someone would call him Stanley, he assumed they were talking about his son Stan, Jr. How did the nick name "Piney" come about? Mrs. Lasky doesn't know, nor do any of her children. Piney didn't always talk racing. He had some fascinating tales about the long distance trips he and wife Clara made in their Bluebird Motorhome.

Piney was one of the best promoters in the country even though he never got a Promoter of the Year Award. In 1992, Piney Lasky was inducted into the Pittsburgh Circle Track Club Hall of Fame along with Earl Bauman, Ed Fiola, Jook George, and Dick Swartzlander.

Race fans, competitors, and people not even associated with racing converged on the little town of Boswell, Pennsylvania on June 13, 1994 to pay their last respects to Lasky. Bentley Warren, the ISMA racer from New York, was saddened by the news of Lasky's death. They were very close and shared a lot of good times at Jennerstown when the tour came to the area.

Western Pennsylvania lost a "Pioneer" of local racing in the area. On June 17, 1994 Stanley "Piney" Lasky took his final lap at Jennerstown Speedway. He was driven around the track one last time, on his way to the cemetery with the green light on, a checkered flag flying from the flag stand, and his employees lining the front stretch wall. Lasky was buried with his trademark cowboy hat and Texas Tie, and his Dale Earnhardt pin. Speedways around the state paid tribute to him with a moment of silence, while Jennerstown, created the most touching tribute. His four-wheeler was parked in turn four, one of his cowboy hats sitting upon the seat, a checkered flag on the back, along with a "Going Racing" sign. Frank Sinatra's song "My Way" was playing on the public address system. There was not a dry eye in the place.

Even though he's gone, Piney will always be at Jennerstown Speedway. When somebody mentions Jennerstown, people still remember Piney Lasky. His spirit will live forever at that race track. Local racing lost one of the greatest and we miss the man we all called "Piney"